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Next Stop City Hall: Towards a World League of Participatory Cities and Regions

Bruno Kaufman
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*Bruno Kaufmann**

Next Stop City Hall

Towards a World League of Open and Participatory Local and Regional Governments

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It is one of the best known speeches in history – with a truly timeless one liner: „A government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from earth.“

US President Abraham Lincoln’s statement was delivered at the climax of the American Civil War on November 19, 1863. A conflict that left almost one million people dead, ended slavery and ensured the territorial integrity of the United States of America. Ever since those bloody days, Lincoln’s commitment to democratic principles, procedures and practices has offered a bottom-line for modern governance at all political levels across the world.

Eighty-three years later, after an even much worse series of atrocities and wars, the General Assembly of the newly established United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its article 21.1 reads: “Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.” While Lincoln at Gettysburg expressed his vision for America in the world, in Paris on December 10, 1948 the world was called upon to “disseminate, display, read (this universal declaration) in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories.”

Yet, history is not linear. Human behavior and interaction are often far from just or rational. The lessons that should be learned from violent conflicts – that they damage everybody and everything – can get lost. And so humankind repeats mistakes, and fails to do the hard work of balancing different interests, of creating sustainable forms of governance, and dealing with complex societies.

As a consequence, high-flying hopes are dashed. We do not have a global legal system or common economic rules. The growth of free, democratic nation-states has been disappointing -- creating an almost “declinist” mood among scholars of modern democracy like Larry Diamond or Francis Fukuyama. This uncertainty about democracy is now shared by many political leaders, governments and political parties around the world, and so we see more use of fears and threats to limit civic rights, legal checks and public access to government at both the national and the transnational levels.

Going local globally

Among the places where democracy is stalled is in the European Union, a political body of more than 500 million people. Some of the EU's most promising democratic tools may not survive. Among the endangered species is the citizens initiative – less than four years old – to propose European legislation. I was part of the process of birthing this European Citizens Initiative. Now I am trying to save it.

Fortunately, there is another side to the backlash against democracy at the national and transnational levels. That side is the subnational one. With urban settlements becoming the preferred place of living, acting and producing across the globe, cities and regions are now quickly evolving into our centers of democracy, the true beacons of people power.

In his thought-provoking book „If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities“ (Yale University Press, 2013) political theorist Benjamin R. Barber shows how local leaders have successfully approached global challenges, including climate change, pandemic, education, social welfare and migration.

“Many mayors in major cities get things done,” argues Barber, who proposes a “World Parliament of Mayors,” to improve global governance.

This New York-born political scientist is certainly right in catching the localist momentum on the global stage. Whatever policy you address globally, there is a bold local feature of it -- from waste collection to public infrastructure, from multiculturalism and economic innovations. Barber's only mistake is to overreach in putting so much focus on the top guys, the mayors. (Does this make his thesis sexier?)

Strong and powerful mayors can be important representatives of their cities, but that is not ideal. At subnational levels—states and provinces and localities—the key ingredients for success are non-partisan, inclusive, responsive and collective leaderships. In other words: the success of local communities in shaping the world is highly dependent on the state of democracy in these cities and subnational regions.

The Tale Of Two Mega-Cities

Take a comparative example of two cities: Beijing, the capital of China, and Seoul, the biggest urban center of South Korea. They are neighbors. They face similar weather challenges. And they also host more than 10 million people each. But while the Chinese Capital is run under a one-party regime with little to no citizens' participation, Seoul has seen all the major political forces in power over the last 25 years – and it has developed as a result into a very democratic place, where the preferences of citizens are not just counted on election day, but are heard every day.

Under the governance of current Mayor Park Won-soon, the citizens of Seoul have taken center stage, literally. While the main public meeting spot of Beijing, the Tian'anmen place, is heavily guarded and every political expression is strictly prohibited, in Seoul the newly opened City Hall – a high-rise building symbolizing green energy and administrative transparency – has been

renamed [Citizen Hall](#). Here all citizens and visitors are offered free spaces, political encouragement and administrative support to make their voices heard. The city's employees help them navigate the path to pro-active, collective action.

And visitors can literally see the results of the differences in governance. While partly picturesque Beijing suffers under harmful smog, with a series of red alerts during winter, Seoul has turned into a heaven for pedestrians and cyclists. Elevated, congested freeways that once filled the inner city have been turned into spaces for living and public gathering.

Other major cities on the world-ranking list of most livable urban centers include Melbourne (Australia), Honolulu (Hawaii), Donostia/San Sebastian (Spain), Vienna (Austria) and Bern (Switzerland). And it may not be an accident that all of them apply participatory policies as a key ingredient of local government.

Amaia Agirreolea Gomez is the head of the Donostia/San Sebastian Public Office for Citizens Participation: "We are a kind of rescue team for democracy here", says Agirreolea Gomez, who heads a team of nine people engaged in informing, navigating and supporting local citizens in public action. The office resides in the former military detention center of the Franco regime in San Sebastian: "Here people were tortured because of political action, now they are supported in exactly doing this," she says.

Donostia/San Sebastian (it's one city—with two names, one in Basque and in Spanish) is one of three provincial capitals in the Spanish part of the Basque Country. After being heavily suppressed during the Franco regime (1936-1975), a separatist terrorist group (ETA) fought against democratic cooperation until 2012, killing more than 800 people. Against this backdrop, the participatory policies applied by a series of local governments in Donostia/San Sebastian have offered an encouraging way forward. (That progress is being celebrated in 2016 as Donostia/San Sebastian is the European Capital of Culture and will host the 2016 Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy [2016globalforum.com] in November.)

Democracy Is Not Just Elections

There is a crucial distinction here between elections and the democracy of truly participatory policies. While thousands of cities and regions across the world are understood as basically democratic because they have elected officials, in many of these places most people are still neither welcome nor invited to participate on a daily basis.

Why? There are both principled justifications and practical justifications for limiting people's ability to choose.

The principled reason is the idea that representative democracy means only representative government; the argument is that elected officials need space to make decisions on their own. And so governments use unbalanced procedural arrangement that lets representatives set the agenda, while offering citizens little to no rights to set issues on the public agenda or be involved in decision-making.

Of course, many local leaders today understand the benefits of civic dialogue and active citizenship in-between elections days. In these cases, the practical reasons for limitations come in: it is difficult to involve citizens until you have developed and invested in an infrastructure for participation to make it sustainable and forward-looking. Without such an infrastructure for participation, you run the big risk of merely getting angry crowds out to oppose you when you make tough local decisions.

The good news are the growing number of cities and regions – as in the examples from Seoul to Donostia/San Sebastian -- now acknowledge the need for comprehensive strategies and policies to strengthen active participation by their citizens. As a result, these places are offering powerful examples of reimagining local government by strengthening democracy.

In both Honolulu (Hawaii) and Bern (Switzerland) participatory centres have been in service for many years: Hawaii's "[Public Access Room](#)" (PAR) at the State Capitol combines educational efforts with efficient support. "You've got lots of power, let us help you put it into action," director Virginia Beck tells Hawaiians at PAR. There, active citizens can use free and fully equipped workspace and have the opportunity to visit nearby offices of legislators and the governor.

In the centre of the Swiss Capital of Bern, a former prison has been transformed into a so-called "[Politforum Käfigturm](#)", an open space with a comprehensive support infrastructure. "Everybody is welcome here, we offer free meeting space on a first come first serve basis," says "Käfigturm"-co-director Michael Fritsche, who hosts more than 400 events a year in a tower originally built in the 16th century as part of the city wall. Ironically this highly successful place is now threatened as the national sponsors of the Politforum – the Swiss Parliament and the Federal Chancellery – do not want to pay for it any more. So local and regional communities in and across Bern are stepping in to let this shining example of participatory government have its well- deserved future!

Global Centres For Innovation

It is such a historic development. Cities that were once protected by walls are now transforming themselves into global centers for innovation, via integrated urban spaces and participatory citizens halls. While of course every city is different, it makes a lot of sense to follow Benjamin Barber's recommendation to create networks of mayors, cities and regions involved in innovative local governments.

Of course, there is nothing really new about partnerships, collaborations, and networks of municipalities and regions. In many countries there are municipal, city and regional associations that in some cases enjoy sovereign rights. In addition, many local and regional entities have so-called "twinning" or "sister city"-arrangements with towns, cities and regions in other countries. There are also functional organs of cooperation between municipalities and regions based around particular areas of joint concern (such as health), common functions (associations of mayors), or districts/regions within a circumscribed geographical area (e.g. municipalities bordering on the Baltic).

The next wave of cooperation is participatory democracy. Efforts are now being made to bring together cities and regions which are committed to promoting and developing active citizenship and participatory democracy. In this context, at its fifth world conference in Tunis in May 2015, the Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy launched its proposal to establish the network “**World League of Open and Participatory Local and Regional Governments (WOP)**” at its forthcoming conference in Donostia/San Sebastian.

Interested local governments, who are invited to join the network should pursue the following shared goals:

- making that citizens’ voices are heard everyday,
not just on election day or referendum day
- granting citizens participatory rights at the local and/or regional level that go beyond the simple right to vote.

These participatory rights should also include the right to be involved in e-petitions, citizens’ proposals, citizens’ initiatives, participatory budgets, citizens’ assemblies, citizen-initiated referendums etc. Depending on the particular jurisdiction, these rights can either be legally certified by a higher political level, or introduced by the local or regional levels themselves. If the higher state level does not provide for such participatory opportunities and if the local or regional level does not have the necessary formal procedural powers, informal consultative forms of participation are also possible.

- pursuing a politically broad-based strategy of reinforcing active citizenship and participatory democracy at the local and/or regional levels and creating an appropriate infrastructure in the form of political committees, administrative posts, and support for public participation. The particular participatory infrastructure and measures to facilitate participation may vary widely from case to case, depending on the specific legal, political, economic, geographical and historical circumstance.
- Cities and regions participating in a network should also be interested in a continuous and lively exchange with other WOP-partners and be prepared - at appropriate times - to take on coordinating functions within the network and/or invite partner cities/regions to conferences, seminars and workshops.

On the other hand, a network-membership will be beneficial to partner cities and regions as it strengthens their international profile, competence and ability to deal with practical challenges (for example building up e-participation platforms and tools).

In sum, the envisaged “World League of Open and Participatory Local and Regional Governments” should and could become a critical contributor to making Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address a little less of a vision and more of a reality: “A government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

Bruno Kaufmann is Chairman of the Election and Democracy Commission in Falun/Sweden and Co-president of the Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy. Contact:
bruno.kaufmann@falun.se